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Movement of the people

Free festivals offer a danceable solution to the commercial exploitation and alienation of an unsound system. No wonder the law wants to ban them

There was a dance down on the farm for new year's eve in Luton, free and unlicensed—a raucous, joyous gathering of interlocking circles of friends, a community celebration on land once squatted and now rented. One message left on one telephone line and word of mouth drew 2,000 people. In the field stood Pink Floyd's old marquee. One of the barns, rebuilt with free pallet wood, rocked to rough dub. The Criminal Justice and Public Order Act could have been used if the police had felt the dance was "likely to cause serious distress to the inhabitants of the locality." Have we a right to dance, a right to party? Police were hardly to be seen that night, but no thanks to any legal right. Those who do it create it. And there are many of us, spanning most age groups, classes and races.

Congregated in the Exodus dub barn were hell's angels, dreadlocks, punks and hippies, black and white, rich and poor, all generations from the sixties to the nineties. Glenn Jenkins is 31 and a former shop steward for the train drivers' union ASLEF, turned Exodus spokesperson. "The act could make a positive difference. Because partying could be a criminal act, because it's been made such a big issue which could lead to big confrontations, it could also lead to dialogue, jaw jaw not war war. That's for us, because we're relatively strong. For smaller groups it's easier for police just to nick you and your gear."

The act gives the police enormous discretion, especially in how they interpret "serious distress". Until we've had one or two cases in court we're all feeling our way," commented a spokesperson for the Association of Chief Police Officers. "The police have to take a decision on what we think the law says, then the courts decide and we fall in line with that. We'd have to prove that someone is distressed. Individuals may well have to give evidence as to how they were distressed."

If this spokesperson is right, that's a step forward

in forcing police to justify their actions. But any officer of superintendent rank and above is empowered to ban a party before it starts and before complaints can be made, provided he or she thinks it is "likely to cause serious distress" and believes two or more people are making preparations for it; ten or more are waiting for it; or ten are already attending it. How the courts choose to interpret this will be crucial.

Who is threatened by the clauses against "raves" in this act? Certainly not the thousands of licensed commercial clubs up and down the country—the Act affects neither licensed nor wholly indoor parties. It's the unlicensed outdoor celebrations that are threatened, those usually put on for free by community groups or travellers with neither the cash nor political clout to obtain licences, covering costs through donations and stalls. According to the Home Office, all the clauses concerning raves, including seizures of vehicles and equipment, will be in place by the spring—when the free, unlicensed party movement takes to the open air.

So who cares? There's an archaic attitude among some who support the right to protest, the right to squat, the right to travel. But the right to party? That's not serious politics. They forget that almost every culture in the history of the world has sought ecstasy through gathering to dance, rocking to the beats with or without consciousness-altering substances. As Jesus said in the Gnostic Gospel Acts of John, before it was suppressed by the established church, along with so-called witches and paganism: "To the universe belongs the dancer. He who does not dance does not know what happens." Commercial parties are all very well. But we're dealing here with one of our most powerful drives, alongside sex—to experience a connection with something far greater than ourselves, directly, without the intercession of priests or shamans. Free parties have helped democratise and liberate this drive.

"We believe it's our right to use places like disused quarries for free parties, as long as we do it safely and responsibly," explains Glenn Jenkins. "Free parties are unauthorised gatherings, communities coming together without 'them' controlling us. A free party isn't put on by someone to profit from someone else. It's done for the love, the warmth, the smiling faces. It's the difference between inviting someone into your house for a cup of tea, and charging someone for a cup of tea. It's the difference between feeling welcome and feeling exploited. We're building a community

based on love, not exploitation. That's clearly contrary to Babylon's values, and it's a powerful political statement." So far as can be ascertained, all the deaths this year and last have been at commercial licensed events, where water can cost two quid a bottle and taps be turned off in tropical temperatures. For whose benefit are these licences being issued? Certainly not for the low-paid and unemployed, who can't afford entrance fees, let alone water. Exodus and hundreds of other dance organisations up and down the country want "sanctioned sites" established for the summer, places like disused quarries where free parties and festivals can continue without being disturbed or disturbing others. And they want licences, free or reasonably priced, with reasonable safety conditions for responsible community groups using appropriate and safe indoor premises during winter—local community centres run by and for the dance culture.

Dance draws people by the thousands. So it's a potent source for change, political as well as personal. Exodus, created for and by dance, generated the money and will to build a sound system; to squat buildings, obtain licences and house people;

to bring people in from the cold and feel warmth in a community; to deny oppressive, proactive policing. Remember the 4,000 dancers who surrounded Luton police station in January 1993, as a protest against Exodus members being arrested over the mike as fists are raised together in love and protest. And understand why such vast police, court and legislative resources have been expended on stopping people dancing for free. We have a right to party, not just in commercial clubs and at commercial festivals, but within our own community. It's a birthright which draws us together. It offers an alternative to isolation and drugged-down alienation. Only by exercising that right responsibly, wisely, peacefully but firmly will we realise it. As the American anarchist Emma Goldman once said: "If I can't dance, I don't want to join your revolution." ■

Below: Exodus, the Luton-based sound system and collective, at the third and Criminal Justice Bill demonstration in London in October 1994.

Pic: Matt

